

Beyond the Backlash: A Feminist Critique of Ivan Illich's Theory of Gender

Gloria Bowles

Introduction: The Context

And today, in the rural Mexico I know so well, a woman would rather die of embarrassment than let a man cook the beans.
—Ivan Illich, *Gender*

In the summer of 1982 I heard of the coming of Ivan Illich as Regents Lecturer to Berkeley to speak of gender. These prestigious, well-paid, and much publicized posts are designed to bring to the campus distinguished thinkers who are not academics but who have made an important contribution to intellectual life. My response was double. On the one hand, I was glad that the subject would get so much publicity. On the other, the irony was not lost on me: in a field dominated by stunning scholarship by women, a man was bringing the study of gender to campus in a most visible way. But I was willing to wait and see. After all, did Illich not have a reputation as a progressive thinker? A certain disquiet began to emerge when I received papers written by Claudia von Werlhof, a sociologist at the University of Bielefeld in West Germany, who criticized Illich's theory of "Schattenarbeit" (shadow work). There was also the news that von Werlhof felt that Illich had used many of her ideas in writing his book, *Shadow Work*,¹ and his new book on gender.² Von Werlhof is direct: in one article she refers to Illich's feminist epiphanies as "Aha-Erlebnisses" (Aha Experiences), which came as he first read feminist analyses of women's unpaid labor.³ She expressed some of the same qualms we felt at Berkeley when we heard of Illich's lectureship: "Ivan Illich is a man and above all a famous man. Peo-

ple listen to him, even take careful note of him. When he speaks about ideas of women, there are people who listen to him; who would never conceive of listening to a woman."⁴

Illich began his series of eight lectures on September 30 to a packed audience of students, feminists, faculty, Illich groupies, and community people. He immediately set up conditions for participation: "Previous knowledge of the . . . text is a *condition* for active participation in the public two-hour discussion which will follow each lecture."⁵ And "Ivan Illich shall accept invitations to the seminars organized by the students. He shall give priority to those seminars in which all participants are well acquainted with the literature listed in . . . specific appendices."⁶ At the first lecture he pointed to the two women who would take care of the "nitty-gritty" details of the course. Also among those handling the nitty-gritty were feminist faculty who had agreed to sponsor independent study sections so that students could get credit for attending the lectures and writing papers based upon them.

The xeroxed reader also told us that "Ivan Illich has invited several colleagues who were closely associated with his studies during the last two years to spend the Fall with him in Berkeley."⁷ Thus he had with him an international entourage; scholars were ever flying in and flying out of his house in the Berkeley hills. One began to sense a kind of carnival atmosphere, a "happening" — and, in fact, it became fascinating to watch just how Illich managed to attract so much attention to himself. I told my European friends that Berkeley would be intrigued by the "happening," but that as democratic Americans we would not take to the Master stance typical of European university teaching. It took a few weeks for the revolt to surface, and, in fact, the papers which follow register the expectation with which feminists greeted Illich's visit and the confusion we felt as we listened to the first two lectures. Ever generous, we continued to be attentive. By the middle of the series there was a sense of severe disappointment which finally gave way to anger.

In midfall a group of us met with two of the women who were part of the entourage, since we felt that they were being used as the necessary female apologists for Illich's ideas. We wanted to speak directly and privately to them about our concern for their token position. Thea Cremers, from Amsterdam, is presently accompanying Illich on his "gender tour"; Susan Hunt, who lives in Maine, had done the massive bibliographical work for the gender book.⁸ Both feel that Illich has important and interesting things to say. A week later Arlie Hochschild suggested that we organize a symposium which would present a feminist response to Illich's ideas. At the

seventh lecture, members of our group passed out flyers announcing our panel presentation, to be called "Is He Taking Us For a Ride?", a play on Illich's declaration at the first lecture that he would be taking us on a "broomstick adventure."

In the "discussion period" after this seventh lecture, Lissa Bell, an undergraduate student in Women's Studies and Anthropology, raised some questions about the atmosphere of the lecture hall:

At the beginning of this lecture the woman in the front row raised the question: Why hasn't anyone disagreed here, in this arena? She never got an answer. I think it was an important question and I'd like to try to answer it. For me there are two sides to the answer. First, something about the whole dynamic here has been repressive. When no one makes objections here during the lectures, and yet afterwards people do object, often vehemently, raising problem upon problem with the theory, I ask myself what is going on here. I am silent too and intimidated — and intimidated most of all by the silence of the other people in the audience. Besides the fact that this situation is unsatisfactory in itself, I believe that to argue and challenge only in the context of the feminist panel, rather than in both arenas, opens the possibility of speaking to the already converted. Second, up until quite recently I have been telling myself that it doesn't really matter whether Illich is right or wrong. He is exciting, stimulating, and challenging. Besides, the problems I see may be cleared up by the end. Well, this is the end, the problems haven't gone away, and now I realize that what I've been telling myself is no longer adequate. It does matter. It matters because Illich — who, I believe, despite the claims of some, should be regarded as a potentially influential force in the world — has argued that any plan of action or any research which has as its base the concept of the "person" (instead of women and men) is not only invalid but actually aids the very ill it attempts to destroy. You have, Mr. Illich, over the last seven weeks, and in your book, stated continuously and vehemently that you do not want to prescribe, do not want even to glance at the future. Yet, in essence, you have done just that. You do predict and you do prescribe. And so, for this reason, it does matter whether your theory is largely correct or largely incorrect.

Throughout the lectures Illich had answered the questions he wanted to and tossed off those which did not interest him. Despite the leftist declarations that these Regents lectures would be open and dynamic, Illich set up a situation in the hall that in fact discouraged critique. Another Women's Studies major saw through his method:

[Part of] his aura of specialness was to subtly make his audience feel dumb and inadequate. This could only be relieved by following him more closely and giving him even more power to define and prescribe our lives.⁹

The announcement of the symposium marked the rising tide of feminist frustration and anger with the seer's heralded lectures. In the following week we did a media blitz; news of the event shot like wildfire through the feminist community. Our planning meetings showed what is meant by a feminist perspective: that is, despite our different disciplinary bents, there was overall agreement, an underlying feminist critique which we all shared. Our careful plans did not include the expectation that a room for 250 would be too small; at least twice that many came. People sat in the aisles and on the stage and some even stood for two and a half hours. Illich arrived to a packed room and immediately jumped up on the stage and said that he did not want the event to be taped. "To be taped is to be raped," he said. After some negotiation, we decided to defer to the wishes of each speaker on this question; most agreed to be taped. I offered a brief introduction, explaining the format, which would include a response by Illich and questions from the audience. I said that we regarded the symposium as part of a critical process, knowing that it was neither possible for us to respond completely to a book and twenty-four hours of lecture in only two hours, nor for Illich to respond completely to our critique in fifteen minutes.

Arlie Hochschild

Illich: The Ideologue in Scientist's Clothing

Eight weeks ago I sat down to hear Ivan Illich's first lecture on gender with great expectations. For I had read *Deschooling Society*, *Medical Nemesis*, and *Shadow Labor*, all fine contributions to a visionary critique of modern society. And so, as his lectures continued, I was confused and finally dismayed to find myself witnessing an unhappy marriage between that original visionary critique and three profoundly reactionary messages about the relations between men and women.

The first message is that efforts to promote gender equality have never benefited more than a tiny minority of women, and that, in fact, this whole

human project is doomed to failure. In his book Illich writes:

Wherever equal rights were legally enacted and enforced, wherever partnerships between the sexes became stylish, these innovations gave a sense of accomplishment to the elites who proposed and obtained them, but left the majority of women untouched, if not worse off than before. (*Gender*, pp. 16-17)

The majority of women, he implies, don't believe in equality. Nor is it, he thinks, possible. He mentions the idea of equality only to dispose of it: he speaks of "impossible equality," the "pipe dream of equality," the "hopeless dream of equality," the "equality women can never have." I found myself asking in disbelief: Can he mean that only an elite among women has benefited from universal suffrage? Or from the spread of legal birth control methods? Or from the reform of rape law? From the opening up of higher education for women? From the opening up of many occupations to women? Certain privileged women *have* been better able to take advantage of such feminist victories, but this is a direct result of our class society, not the result of a struggle for equality.

The second message is that men and women differ so fundamentally that they are best suited to a gender-caste system, best illustrated by "the world of vernacular gender." He associates this system with the great civilizations of history, while he links tolerance for increased integration between men and women with decadence, chaos, and economic individualism.

The third message is that women are, but men are not, the problem. By largely ignoring men, Illich exempts himself from the need to talk about man's relation to woman and his historical domination of her. By not acknowledging male culture as part of the problem, he avoids the implication that changes in male culture could be part of a solution.

Before commenting further on these messages, let me briefly summarize Illich's general thesis, for the benefit of those who were not able to attend the lectures.

The thesis is surprisingly simple. Illich divides European cultural history into three great periods. The first, which stretches from the mists of prehistory to roughly the eleventh century (the timing varies with locale), is the period of "Vernacular Gender." There is no commerce to speak of, few industrial tools, no big cities. Each with their own "gendered tools" and their own "gendered" ways of using them, men and women contribute to subsistence farming. Each lives in gendered space and time, thinks gendered thoughts, and has gendered feelings.

The second period (from the eleventh to the seventeenth century) is the